

Mises Wire

For Socialists, It Doesn't Matter if Socialism "Works." What Matters Is Power.



Tags: [Economic Policy](#), [Media and Culture](#), [Socialism](#), [World History](#)

02/29/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Jason Montgomery](#)

A recent rash of libertarian-leaning right-wing podcasters' rehashing of a [shopworn takedown of socialism](#) has bothered me to the point of launching into this essay. It goes something like "Why is this still a thing? When are they going to realize that IT DOESN'T WORK, and drop it?"

This criticism deserves a closer look. Maybe socialism does too. By the way, I define the term as any economic paradigm that turns over the means of production to "society," "the workers," or some other fictitious entity that effectively means *the state*; and limits or prohibits private property.

Here's my best stab at fleshing this out. Socialism is defective, because everywhere it's instituted (which is nowhere near Scandinavia, but that's a different topic), the assured universal plenty fails to materialize. Instead they get extreme poverty, hunger, and deficits of every variety. The evidence is littered throughout history, all over the world. So, any idiot still promoting this mess is ignorant to the facts of reality.

Quite a counterargument; factually correct, hard-hitting, down-to-earth, and practical. No abstract political theory here, just the bottom-line question: does it work? Period. Look to the historical statistics. Any other

consideration doesn't correspond to the real world, so it's useless. Thus, we've effectively relegated socialism to the historical scrap heap, right?

Not in the least.

I'm not calling this refutation ineffective. It's much worse than that.

First there's the obvious question; what does it mean for an economic system to "work"? That nobody's poor? What's the standard of "poor"? A certain universal margin of disposable income? A level of GDP? Maybe in a survey of 1,000 random people, 672 of them rated their economic status at least "satisfactory"? What are the criteria? What's the barometer? How can we know if it "works"?

Couldn't someone just cherry-pick an arbitrary standard of "working" in hindsight and proudly tout socialism's great success? [It's happened before!](#) And here's the real question: Who could this someone be? By what right could he decide this measure on behalf of an entire population?

Well, those might be tough questions to answer, but surely we can know what it means to *not work*. Socialism has repeatedly yielded famine, rationing, production shortages, and the seeming disappearance of natural resources. An economic record like this *has to be* sufficient to dismiss it.

Think so? Let me ask you...

- Are you against slavery because it doesn't engender a thriving agrarian industry?
- Are you against restricting speech because it does a bad job protecting people's feelings?
- Are you against random home searches because they don't uncover enough contraband to bolster public safety?

If not, *why* not? These are exactly the grounds on which you're rejecting socialism; because it appears not to satisfy its stated societal goals. Therefore...

What if it did, indeed, *work*? If it produced a society of loyal proletarians, happily subsisting on their allotted resources, working limited hours at their communal farms and factories, with plenty of days off, and enjoying their state-approved hobbies with all that spare time? Then I guess you'd be all for it?

Is this really your angle of opposition, or is there something else at work here?

"Of course, there's more to it!" you say. "Beyond economics, socialism has repeatedly led to mass surveillance, arbitrary incarceration, torture, death camps, and the greatest human atrocities every known! That's the *real* counterargument!"

You're just digging yourself deeper into the rhetorical pit.

You know the responses to this. Say them with me. "That wasn't real communism." "That was all just one bad guy in charge, not an indictment on the system itself." "It was the leftover greed and sadism from the market economy." "Marxism is scientifically sound. It just requires a maturation period for people to learn the right values, then it all turns to paradise."

Are these platitudes frustrating? Well, anyone arguing that "it doesn't work" has tacitly agreed to the exact same underlying premises.

This argument appeals to pragmatism, utilitarianism, empiricism, and consequentialism; the Four Horsemen of Sophistry. It says don't knock socialism till you try it. Gauge its practical impacts (pragmatism), based solely on experience (empiricism), to see if it confers the greatest good on the greatest number (utilitarianism) by delivering its promised economic equality and prosperity (consequentialism).

This is part of the desperate longstanding campaign to render economics a hard science, with a definitive answer, discoverable through rigorous testing of hypotheses. If you accept these terms, then "it doesn't work" is no counterargument at all. The possibility of a blown experiment is built right into this scheme. It just hasn't worked *yet*, so we tweak the theory and try again.

Did we get... riches and happiness for all? Great! It *worked*! Or... an extermination campaign of biblical proportions? Ooops, back to the drawing board. There was no way to see *that* coming.

Here is where "it doesn't work" surpasses fruitlessness and becomes self-defeating. If you posit one unfavorable result (or a few) as grounds to reject the theory wholesale, the other side can call you inconsistent and unscientific, and they're right! See how their fraudulent reasoning can make a correct conclusion seem wrong?

Therefore, socialism continues to be apologized for, rationalized, promoted, and consequently implemented around the globe; with more comebacks than Aerosmith (apologies to Aerosmith).

(This is covered brilliantly in [Hoppe's *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism*](#).)

This plays to two of Marx's great historical swindles. First, commerce and all human action can be scientifically engineered by a central authority to produce desired ends. Second, that the nobility of those ends in the indeterminate future justifies any and all means, potentially limitless suffering, in the present.

Other than stripping the ethics, morality, and all humanity from human action; whether it "works" can never be resolved, just deliberated ad infinitum, making it ideal mainstream media fodder. Under any legitimate scrutiny, it collapses under its own haughty intellectual weight because there's something missing at its foundation; **fundamental principles** that can be ascertained as self-evidently true or not.

To go after socialism, you must aim for its fundamental principles. And what are some of those?

- **Rooted in collectivism** – no individual is of material importance, only society as a whole. Any number of individual needs, preferences, and lives can and should be sacrificed for the good of the collective.
- **Absence of a market** – production and trade operate by the will of central planners, not economic actors. What gets made, in what quantity, and for what use is not determined by consumer demand or the profit motive, but by top-down calculations. Based on what? Such questions will not be tolerated. Now, get in the bread line! Which brings us to...
- **Necessitates a totalitarian state** – This centralization of economy requires such thorough micromanagement of human action that monitoring, espionage, harassment, and stiff penalties for violators (for starters) *must* become features of the landscape. Some adherents claim that state control, and the state itself, will one day become unnecessary under socialism, once the people fall in line (read *are beaten into submission*). But, like the arrival of universal abundance, that day never seems to come. More on this momentarily...

This argument may not be perfect, but notice the differences between this and where we started. These premises are axiomatically integral to socialism. No experience, experimentation, or research is required to bear them out. No statistical data is going to come along and change them. These aren't *ends*, which cannot be conclusively known at the outset of any initiative (if they ever can at all). These are *means*, which *are* known, instantly and to a certainty, as they effectively become the material conditions of life in the given society. Economics is a journey, not a destination, so those someday promises of wealth and statelessness in exchange for your present suffering mean nothing from the man prodding you with the rifle.

Now a REAL debate begins.

The socialist must be prepared to defend all of the items above, *at least*. Any claim against the necessity of these factors can be gleefully met with, “then that’s not real socialism!” If they prefer their ideologies a la carte, by plucking the “good bits” of socialism and discarding the gulags and mass graves; then they’re arguing for something else entirely, a *mixed economy*, the polluting of the market with some degree of the above tenets.

Do the Horsemen’s graphs and data have any validity? Sure, as persuasive support. But they cannot BE your argument. That must come from [First Principles](#), e.g. freedom, property, and individual sovereignty. These are all that matter. To subordinate them to numbers and stats is to discount them entirely.

So, when it comes to socialism; stop saying it doesn’t work, stop calling it a perfect idea on paper that falters in implementation, and stop dignifying its adherents with “noble intentions.” Give it its intellectual due, then you can call it what it is; an evil concept on its face that has no place among the human species.



Note: The views expressed on Mises.org are not necessarily those of the Mises Institute.

What Is The Mises Wire?

Mises Wire offers contemporary news and opinion through the lens of Austrian economics and libertarian political economy.

Submitting articles to *Mises Wire*

Reprints, Permissions & Copyrights

The views expressed on *Mises Wire* and mises.org are not necessarily those of the Mises Institute.

Subscribe to the Mises Wire

Latest Articles

Getting the Great Depression (Almost) Right -- And Totally Wrong

03/04/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Joshua Mawhorter](#)

There are others, besides the Austrians, who acknowledge the crucial role of monetary policy and even blame the Federal Reserve for the Great Depression. Some scholars, which we can greatly appreciate...

Private REITs Hide Commercial Real Estate Distress While Begging for Bailouts

03/04/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Artis Shepherd](#)

During the most recent commercial real estate bubble, two things happened in tandem. First, due to the Federal Reserve's zero interest rate policy, savers were unable to invest their cash at a decent...

A Principled View of Nations and Nationalism

03/02/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Wanjiru Njoya](#)

In *Nations by Consent* Murray Rothbard draws an important distinction between the nation and the state. While he regards the state as predatory, exploitative, parasitic and criminal, he does not view...

Why the Bubble Economy Isn't the Real Economy

03/02/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Dusty Wunderlich](#)

There is a grand economic fable that has been unfolding over the past two decades, one filled with mythical creatures and great fantasy. The main character of this fable is the grand wizard of the...

Central Bank Digital Currencies Are Dangerous and Unnecessary

03/02/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Daniel Lacalle](#)

The main central banks have been deliberating on the concept of introducing a digital currency. However, many citizens fail to grasp the rationale behind it when the majority of transactions in major...

Meet the Writer

Jason Montgomery

Jason Montgomery resides in Seoul, South Korea where he teaches English writing, speaking, and listening at a law firm...

For Socialists, It Doesn't Matter if Socialism "Works." What Matters Is Power.

02/29/2024 • [Mises Wire](#) • [Jason Montgomery](#)

A recent rash of libertarian-leaning right-wing podcasters’ rehashing of a shopworn takedown of socialism has bothered me to the point of launching into this essay. It goes something like “Why is this...

You Don’t Like It? Leave! The Telling Sophistry of Tax Apologists

05/19/2023 • [Mises Daily](#) • [Jason Montgomery](#)

Contrary to the worldview of progressives, taxation and the coercion it brings are not part of a "social contract." Instead, they are implemented by force. Original Article: "You Don’t Like It? Leave...

Subscribe to our Mailing Lists

Email Address *

Email Subscriptions

- ☐ **Daily**
- ☐ **News & Events**
- ☐ **Bookstore**
- ☐ **Week in Review**
- ☐ **The Misesian**

Marketing Permissions

Please select all the ways you would like to hear from Mises Institute:

- ☐ **Email**

You can unsubscribe at any time by clicking the link in the footer of our emails. For information about our privacy practices, please visit our website.

We use Mailchimp as our marketing platform. By clicking below to subscribe, you acknowledge that your information will be transferred to Mailchimp for processing. [Learn more about Mailchimp's privacy practices.](#)

Subscribe



SUPPORT LIBERTY

The Mises Institute exists solely on voluntary contributions from readers like you. Support our students and faculty in their work for Austrian economics, freedom, and peace.

Donate today

 Group photo of Mises staff and fellows

Browse Library

[Who is Ludwig von Mises?](#)

[What is the Austrian School of Economics?](#)

[Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics](#)

[Journal of Libertarian Studies](#)

[Mises Wire](#)

[Human Action Podcast](#)

[The Misesian](#)

About the Mises Institute

[Fellowship in Residence](#)

[What is the Mises Institute?](#)

[Driving Directions to the Institute](#)

[Become a Member](#)

[Mises Events](#)

[Mises Bookstore](#)
[Finances and Board](#)
[Subscribe to Email Lists](#)
[Support Mises](#)
[Privacy Statement](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Contact Us

Mises Institute
518 West Magnolia Avenue
Auburn, Alabama 36832-4501
Phone: 334.321.2100
Fax: 334.321.2119
[Email Us](#)
[Join our Mailing List](#)

Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito

Website powered by Mises Institute donors



Mises Institute is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent the law allows. Tax ID# 52-1263436